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SUBJECT: HONDURAN ELECTIONS: SAN PEDRO SULA MAYORAL RACE A
TOSSUP BETWEEN NEWCOMER AND VETERAN POLITICIAN

REF: TEGUCIGALPA 2346 AND PREVIOUS

1. (SBU) Summary: In recent meetings with the two leading mayoral candidates in San Pedro Sula, the second largest city and economic center of Honduras, the candidates gave PolOff an overview of their background, political goals, and perspective on the upcoming November 27 election. The race is a tossup in the polls between a National Party political newcomer and a Liberal Party veteran politician, with a large undecided vote. The winner will be vaulted to national prominence. End Summary.

National Party: Arturo "Tuky" Bendana Pinel

2. (U) Arturo "Tuky" Bendana Pinel is running for mayor in San Pedro Sula (SPS) on Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo's National Party ticket. He defeated the relatively unpopular incumbent mayor, Oscar Eduardo Kilgore Lopez, in the February primaries, in a surprisingly easy upset. Bendana, born September 8, 1953 in SPS, is a doctor (gynecologist). He comes from a family of doctors that founded Hospital Bendana. Bendana is married and has three kids. During the four years that Bendana was director of Hospital Mario Catarino Rivas (the largest hospital in SPS), he claims there were never any strikes, which is unusual given the high rate of labor protests by doctors and other medical personnel. Bendana has also been heavily involved in professional sport as the president of Club Marathon (a successful Honduran soccer team).

3. (SBU) This is Bendana's first time running for any political position. He stated that his main reason for running for mayor was because he was tired of injustices to the citizenry of SPS and frustrated with indifference in many sectors of society on many levels. His basic platform is three-fold: security, employment, and cleanliness. Bendana's slogan is "Manos Limpias, Manos Seguros" (Clean Hands, Safe Hands), tying directly into his professional medical background for which he is well known for in SPS, and Lobo's Work and Security platform. He is a supporter of CAFTA.

4. (SBU) Bendana strongly supports Lobo's stand on crime, especially since he feels that outside investment needs to feel sure and safe. He thinks that the crime rates are so high in SPS because of the lack of employment. He feels that employment in the SPS area can only get better when there is better security and a stronger alliance between the municipal and national governments.

5. (SBU) Bendana would like to push for better security by having better-equipped police teams and posts in vulnerable sectors of SPS. He insinuated that private businesses and the Chamber of Commerce have money for police assistance but use it improperly. Therefore, he wants to create one fund for police and a separate fund for firefighters (the latter of which are dependent on donations) that would provide needed training, equipment, etc.

6. (SBU) Bendana would also like to promote eco-tourism in SPS. He envisions the Merendon Mountains outside SPS with the potential of the La Tigra park outside Tegucigalpa. He admits that the fear of crime prompts people to stay in SPS only in passing and then travel to the Caribbean coast. Additionally, Bendana said he wants more women to be involved in all sorts of sports, and said he would like to see more emphasis given to culture, arts, and music as well.

7. (SBU) Bendana's own assessment of the presidential elections was that they are very close but that ultimately Lobo will win because his platform is stronger on security. As to his mayoral opponent, Bendana feels that he has a "leg-up" on Padilla since Padilla has long been involved in politics but in Bendana's view has never changed anything for the better.

8. (SBU) Comment: Bendana appeared to be sincere, intelligent, articulate, and seems to connect with the people, but his idealism may be difficult to implement given the challenges of Honduran politics. End Comment.

19. (U) Rodolfo Augusto "Fico" Padilla Sunseri is running for mayor in SPS on Manuel "Mel" Zelaya's Liberal Party ticket. Padilla is an American citizen born February 11, 1960 in Massachusetts who attended preparatory school in Boston. He has an undergraduate degree from the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH) in social and legal sciences. He comes from a family based in agriculture. Padilla is a SPS city councilman (first elected in 1997) and lost the 2001 mayoral race to Kilgore. He is married with at two children from his current marriage and another child from a previous marriage.

110. (SBU) Padilla's believes that the National Party is meddling too much in small business (with fees, rules, regulations, etc). He wants to leave the business sector alone and deal with the problems of the neighborhoods and communities, primarily in infrastructure which he thinks is the key element to a better neighborhood. Padilla said he feels that people get elected and then back off from their duties; he wants to stay connected to voters to prevent that from happening. On Padilla's list of "to do's" is organizing more sports competitions and helping out the arts.

111. (SBU) On the topic of transparency, Padilla said he wants to be honest and to combat corruption. He believes there are two elements needed to combat corruption: (1) a notables' commission, and (2) a law for municipalities. He feels that in order to successfully combat corruption, Honduras needs to simplify the bureaucracy and to analyze corruption. Padilla considers that development is affected by too many middlemen and that there is a "corruption line".

112. (SBU) On the subject of citizen participation, a prominent campaign theme of Zelaya, Padilla said he wants people to take more action in government. He wants decentralization at the municipal level as well. Padilla wants to work with various civil society organizations and draft a development plan in three sectors: health, security, and community. He recognizes that there is a lack of participation by the working class and by youth.

113. (SBU) Padilla blames the problems of SPS on the politically powerful closing doors, the media being difficult to deal with, and expensive government undertakings. He, therefore, wants to revitalize SPS by improving public services, simplifying municipal administration, and helping smaller businesses (mostly via training). He is worried about too many GOH ministers involved in the political parties and their positions. He made it a point to mention his and the Liberal Party's dislike of the involvement of Minister of Defense Federico Breve and Minister of Public Security Oscar Alvarez in National Party politics.

114. (SBU) When asked about crime, Padilla says that Honduras cannot develop without decreasing the crime rate. He feels crime is a difficult subject to tackle and believes that it would require an integrated program. Padilla believes that municipal police are needed in addition to national police.

115. (SBU) He stated that he supports CAFTA and wants to create a micro-business to deal with CAFTA and help existing micro-businesses.

116. (SBU) Comment: Padilla answered many questions with general positions, and is clearly more a politician than Bendana. He brought to the meeting two Liberal Party candidates for city council Jacobo Jose Regalado Weizemblut and Juan Miguel Lopez Erazo, both of whom he defeated in the February primary. He delegated many questions for his colleagues to answer. End Comment.

Ford